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SPECIAL ARTICLES

PAINTERS AND CRITICS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: DIDEROT

BY PROFESSOR WILLIAM M. SLOANE

PART II

YET in his slack unmorality Diderot was without a shred of hypocrisy, and the sincerity of his emotions was as appealing as the naïveté of his judgments. There is really but one interesting thing in all the twenty volumes of his collected works, and that is their impudent, irregular, enthusiastic, melancholic, exultant, superficial author. He is his age personified, enthusiastic to folly about phrases, aphorisms, axioms, maxims, oracles—all of which represent petulant discontent with past and present, have no foundation in authority or experience, and foreflash a visionary Utopia.

Take the whole group of friends, or at least contemporaries—Bayle, Fontenelle, Le Sage, Marivaux, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Buffon, Mirabeau and André Chénier: every one was a sort of parlor knight-errant; an exquisite connoisseur sipping the sweets and rejecting the bitter waters of life; toying with the pleasures of sense they liked and flaying all the forms of naughtiness which they themselves disdained; seekers after place and patronage, and satirists in the Roman sense, craving the full dish from which to select the moral or unmoral dainty they lusted after in their respective spheres, though rejecting with acid scorn those to which they were sensuously averse. Friendship was a fashion: and that of Diderot for Grimm was also a passion. This world, the present hour, the utter license of animalism, deep into the obscene, was the "natural" sport of the body, while a fascinating elegance of dress and manner was its seductive mask behind which cleverness had full play. We simply have to accept the representative author as he is; on some sides disgusting, in some volumes wallowing in fifth, in conduct totally immoral even by the loosest standards; on other sides exhibiting sensibility and compassion, appreciating what is sound and genuine, capable of awakening the fiercest sentiment in those he loved, lavish beyond conception of his power and his time in helping onward all the poor devils of his age; a client of the rich and yet proud in spirit with almost no cringing servility. We would say such contradictions were impossible, had they not really existed.

He is often called "the little burgher" and he was one; as also the "literary hack" which he likewise was: precisely for these reasons he was the man of his hour. His enormous output was due to the patient, plodding grind of the day laborer, the tremendous field of his knowledge, to the trained receptivity of the professional writer. As we have explained, these two—industry and comprehensiveness—blended into one. As might be imagined, little of permanent value was produced where thoroughness was lacking. His novels and plays are now read

only by the scholar; his encyclopedia, at best an adaptation from foreign sources, has gone the way of its predecessor the dictionary of Bayle, into the rummage chamber of the past, to be handled only by stock-takers or the curious. Yet in two directions, contrary it seems to all historic precedent, there were set in motion social forces of intensity and permanence. Diderot, d'Alembert and the other encyclopedists must be considered with respect in every treatise on political economy and the history of philosophy, not because they were profound constructive thinkers, but because they scored so deeply on their time. What concerns and interests us here is Diderot's thoughts, both profound and constructive, regarding the fine arts, particularly painting.

Of this insufficient notice has been taken in America. The art critic has never come to his own among us, and the artist considers him as a foe rather than as a friend. This should be quite otherwise and with due attention can be remedied. An example is before us in the case of Diderot, even though our age be so different and the man-product of a sort which does not bear comparison, creditably or discreditably—so totally different is raw material and handling.

The taste of the "little burgher" in art was for subjects essentially domestic and peculiarly French. He had not travelled in youth, was never in Italy and had no appreciation for essentially classic or romanesque themes. For this reason Greuze was his favorite painter. To idealize and make beautiful the French peasant girl as the village bride, or to paint the "father's curse" and immortalize homely morality—this type of easel picture or genre as "style," the one style, made a powerful appeal to Diderot. For him it was a means toward counteracting the extreme cosmopolitanism of the age. In a way the French prettiness of the Fragonards and Watteaus exerted a similar influence, but its call was not to the masses. Not that Diderot was democratic; he was not; but he was a burgher, and in that famous Third Estate he saw the permanence of what he himself was, and what he conceived the French "thing in itself" to be. He was uneasy about morality, whatever his attitude to religion might be; in all probability uneasy subjectively, for he manifests in many places great disgust about his own life and manners.

This doubt amounted to skepticism and found expression in a subject which he gave in 1749 to the Academy of Lyons for its annual competition; viz.: whether or not, the renaissance of the sciences and arts had contributed to the purification of morals?

This question expressed in fact the anxiety of the century. It so attracted and fixed the attention of Rousseau that he spent his life and energy in an attempt to answer it. While Diderot's official authorship, sternly censured by state authority before publication, appears, in the large, to have given an affirmative answer, the direct opposite is true of his fugitive pieces, not collected nor permanently published, and in many cases not even printed until after his death. These all look to the negative. They deal very ineffectually with the drama, but in the discussion of painting—incidentally too of poetry—they exhibit his genius at its height. It is by them that he has become immortal.

Although he has now passed into oblivion, the Abbé Raynal was among the most influential men of his day. It was he who began to write accounts of the picture exhibitions held in Paris, for circulation at various German courts, and at that of the great Catherine in Russia. There was both glory and gain in the enterprise, for the price of a written copy was about sixty dollars. These so-called "Salons" were continued by Grimm, whose "leaves" on philosophy and things in general had made him eminent elsewhere, and circulated biennially on the conclusion of each exhibition. With what is styled in a certain vernacular "a crush" on Grimm, Diderot was even more that author's handyman than he was the hackwriter for publishers. So in 1759 the preparation of these circulating critiques became one of Diderot's avocations. In all, he wrote eleven, that for 1773 being done by another hand while he was traveling in Holland and Russia.

I confess that in perusing and reperusing portions of the Salons as collected and edited in the standard edition of Assezat it is hard to feel the full power and charm which they exerted and have continued to exert. It is easy to read in them the person and purpose of the writer; difficult to supply the seventeenth century background without which they lose their high relief. Madame Necker told their author, however, that he had discovered the secret of turning even the commonest modern paintings into poetry; Schlegel wrote that a description of paintings by Diderot was an imperial luxury; Carlyle saw even in his dramas an attempt toward great things but indulges in rapture over the Salons, as do also Morley and Scherer. "What with their unrivalled clearness" says Carlyle, "painting the picture over again for us, so that we too see it and can judge it; what with their sunny fervor, inventiveness, real artistic genius, which wants nothing but a hand, they are, with some few exceptions in the German tongue, the only pictorial criticisms we know of worth reading." Beyond peradventure Diderot originated the world-struggle of the painters during his century to replace convention by faithfulness to nature; the strife never-ending, the battle of the giants still waging. Goethe thought the "Essay on Painting" well worth translating and expounding, a task he performed with magisterial power. His other readers, the elect few, unite in the opinion that Diderot could and did verbally compose a picture far better than the professional painters themselves.

The two most important of the nine "Salons" are those of 1763 and 1767. To the former are appended his studies in painting: the other is introduced by a long letter on exhibitions generally, on the

"accursed race of amateurs," on nature, the antique and the ideal. These with scattered remarks on painting culled from his miscellanies by a conscientious editor, and the famous article in the Encyclopedia on the "Beautiful" form a very remarkable though comparatively small body of constructive criticism with which every writer on art and every painter should be familiar. For the eighteenth century the work was revolutionary. In the first place it is the product of a many-sided polymath looking at his subject from all sides; in the second place it is the spirit of an age as expressed in a character quite the most influential in its time and place, and in the third place the writer's elation, suggestion, encouragement, while controlling second-rate contemporaries but slightly, were productive of a second generation whose painting is natural, national and great. The impulse of the creative art which began with David has made Paris the Mecca of painters for three generations.

What was the secret of this power? In his light and frivolous letters to that queer, old-maid mistress Mlle. Volland, he chatters freely about his awful labors; and they were awful. Think of twenty years unbroken literary hacking on the encyclopedia under stern censorship and for a scanty living: and then imagine him at fifty-two, worn but indomitable, assuming not merely the burdens of Holbach, Raynal, Grimm and the rest, but emerging into full-fledged, responsible, personal authorship! Whether or not he deserves the style of philosopher almost universally attributed to him is questionable, as we have said; we use the word differently. But from the Volland correspondence his philosophic point of view in art stands clearly revealed and justifies the title. The intellect furnishes scanty enjoyment; the mystical and mysterious furnish keen delight and in rich abundance: in similar ways the teaching of art is dull and dry; while looking—the sense of sight, the appreciation of color, form, perspective—gives us boundless pleasure. How to compose and paint attractive pictures and what to enjoy through the sense of sight? These are the central things in Diderot's doctrine of art. Speaking of his Salon for 1765 he writes:

"I am sure I had all the imagination and fire of thirty years, with a foundation of knowledge and judgment which I did not have earlier. I took my pen, I wrote fifteen days on end from eve till dawn and filled two hundred pages with ideas and style in the same ordinary small handwriting as I now use to you and on the same paper." Further he expresses indifference to popular opinion and no little elation over his achievement. It is enough for him that there is one single man in existence who appreciates him at his true worth, and never more than now: that man is Grimm! He likes also to think that the great Catherine of Russia will find "a few moments of amusement" in the perusal of what he has written. If we may judge from our own feelings as we peruse what he wrote, he was absolutely correct. To read the Salons is almost like playing tennis. The author is his own ball, first in this court and then in that, and by his own confession very frequently at fault or entirely out of bounds. To follow him or his discursions and yet keep track of his game is a bewildering but pleasurable mental exercise.

Exactly as he dissects and recomposes every book and every play which he criticizes, he takes apart every picture and then puts the bits together. His "metaphysic of art," an amusing misnomer, is an unbroken succession of tales, reminiscences, witticisms, sallies and illustration. Addressing a certain painter on the subject of his picture, he recalls an anecdote: how a country priest inspecting his organ-loft inadvertently placed his foot on the pedals. Hearing the resultant note he exclaimed: "Ha, ha! I am playing the organ; it is not as hard as I supposed!" "Monsieur Baudouin" [he addresses the painter] "you have put your foot on the pedal—and that is all!"

Arguing and illustrating at the top of his bent, as he continually does, he naturally blunders, and that frequently; with a start he then becomes aware of his false reasoning. But not to erase a single word of his manuscript and rewrite—never! His own slip enables him to clinch some invaluable idea of criticism by his own example. Speaking of the base ingratitude of a second-rate woman artist from Berlin for whose debts and character he had made himself sponsor, he says she had given "the poor philosopher a lesson, from which the poor philosopher will not profit, for he will remain simple and stupid as God made him."

The greatest of Diderot's critics thinks the *Salons* are the real memoirs of their author: and they are. To the superficial reader they exhibit a weird confusion, a congeries of unrelated parts in a sort of dislocated personality, compounded of pruriency and purity, of spite and charity, of vinegar and oil. But M. Scherer sums up the truth when he says that Diderot's outstanding quality is the impartiality with which he judges friend and foe. He closely realizes the ideal of a critic. Knowing well how to praise cordially, even enthusiastically: yet without fatuity or blindness to fault. He could be severe and yet withhold none of the admiration due for certain qualities. Scherer, generally impassive, becomes apostolic as he exclaims—"Dear fellow-critics, believe me, our judgments are too much of one piece: we must emancipate them: we must inspire them more with the clearest lesson drawn from life: that everything, even the work of the greatest among the sons of men, is imperfect, confused, relative; that in the matter of contradiction and limit everything is possible, that every virtue implies some alloy, every heroism some cowardice, all genius some folly!"

"Don't listen to him" said an admirer when Lully was talking nonsense "he's just a genius; he has no common-sense!"

So Diderot would express the most contradictory opinions of the same person, of a Van Loo or a La Grenée—even of his beloved Greuze, and both opinions would be true. Himself a perfect specimen of all contradictions, he despised the vulgar

error that every man must be entirely this or entirely that—all one or all the other, in higher or lower degree.

In the summation and conclusion of such considerations a country like ours—a mixture of mixtures in race, tradition, refinement, religion, poetries and culture—may well find immense encouragement. We are not a melting pot at all in the sense of fusing incongruities into congruity—an impossibility, if ever there were an impossibility! But we are a federation, not so much of so-called sovereign states or administrative districts, as of peoples, stubborn in loyalties to widely divergent ideals. The French spirit in the eighteenth century, like that of England in the seventeenth, was a mechanical mixture and not a chemical blend. We could illustrate to the extent of folio volumes its single uniting purpose, which was, to get the best; and with England to the north and Spain to the south and Italy to the east an interchange of notions was constant: lively even to the extent of substitution in many respects.

Among all the galaxy of watery luminaries one shines out clear in his perception, that within the huge cosmopolitan grab-bag there is an object not greatly desiderated, namely a French spirit, a main-spring fit to restore nature to her throne, and almost by him alone conceived to be precious. And how does Diderot go about to find it in art? By noting incongruities in the works of each and all, by election, appreciation and exhibition of what was French and what was alien. Concerning this last his talk is brutal and too often filthy, but the age was brutish and the language he used was understood.

And the result? At first very slight. The northern courts, for whom that expensive news-letter was written, were eager to hear and slow to heed; it was only the inner circle which was even aware of what was doing and writing. But the creative mediocrity in the art-world knew all about the child among them taking notes—and two generations later, as art progress is measured, all France awoke to find itself politically humbled, perhaps, but at least keen to realize what was its own in art and letters, not only keen but self-sacrificing, suffering for patriotism in all that renders living alike beautiful and interesting.

It is not an empty fable to attribute this phenomenon, which is no mere appearance but a hard fact, a truth, to the "little burgher" who was a literary hack, a polymath and a polygraph—a harlequin at times, a clown at others, but always a passionate lover of his own and as entertaining in his productions as is a Christmas pantomime to little merry-makers and holiday-seekers!

William Milligan Sloane

